



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Budget and Finance Committee approves corrective action plan for the Navajo Nation Veteran Housing Program

WINDOW ROCK – The Budget and Finance Committee met on Tuesday to consider Legislation No. 0209-17, which seeks to accept an internal audit report and to approve a correction action plan for the Navajo Nation Veterans Administration's Veteran Housing Program.

The Navajo Nation Office of the Auditor General conducted the internal audit with the assistance of external auditing entity REDW, LLP, Certified Public Accountants, to determine whether the NNVA Veteran Housing Program is operating in a manner that ensures that the goals of the program are achieved and completed through the appropriate policies and protocols.

According to the legislation, the completed internal audit found eight findings that require corrective action for the housing program. The internal audit reported that:

- The NNVA was unable to illustrate the expenditure of a \$1.9 million lump sum paid to Home Depot for materials, due to the lack of documentation
- Employee applications were incomplete and qualified employees were not hired
- Contrary to the housing program's intent to hire veterans to build the homes, non-veterans were hired
- Lack of supporting documentation proving that eligible veterans were assisted, and in some cases, ineligible individuals received a home
- The Veteran Housing Program exposed itself to liability risks because post-award requirements were not adhered to after veterans were selected
- Although \$6.4 million was spent, veterans were still dissatisfied with the program
- Several completed veteran's homes were not in livable or safe conditions
- Insufficient project communication and tracking led to increased costs, construction delays, and dissatisfied veterans

BFC vice chair Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinõn, Whippoorwill) raised concerns regarding ineligible veterans who were awarded homes, especially when some were found to already have one or more existing homes.

“The people that already had homes committed fraud. Are we going to allow them to commit fraud and get away with it? You need to track down the individuals that weren’t eligible, work with the [Navajo Department of Justice], and require them to pay back the cost of the home. The message will go back to the veterans and they will think twice about committing fraud,” said Delegate Witherspoon.

Delegate Witherspoon stressed that the intent of the housing program was to assist homeless Navajo veterans and to provide minor renovations to veterans’ homes that are in need of repair.

“We should be helping veterans, not doing it for them because it creates an entitlement obligation that doesn’t work out for the best of the Nation. It creates a dependency that we shouldn’t be engaged in, rather we need to empower our veterans,” said Delegate Witherspoon.

BFC member Council Delegate Lee Jack, Sr. (Dilkon, Greasewood Springs, Indian Wells, Teesto, Whitecone) said that Navajo veterans constantly approach him within his communities inquiring about when the Veteran Housing Program would build their homes.

“A lot of the veterans had a lot of complaints because they were not treated well and were disrespected. They never got a good answer as to why their homes were not being built. Some would see lumber delivered to their home site, but they waited for a very long time, some up to two years, and they would ask when will they start building their homes,” said Delegate Jack.

Delegate Jack said the corrective action plan should not be viewed in a negative way, and encouraged the program to use the plan as a tool to correct the deficiencies and to move forward in a positive manner to complete the housing initiative.

The corrective action plan states that the Office of the Auditor General would conduct a follow-up review in 12 months upon the approval of the legislation to verify that the deficiencies were corrected within the housing program.

BFC members voted 3-0 to accept the audit and approve the corrective action plan for the NNVA Veteran Housing Program. The BFC serves as the final authority on the bill.

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